



It was an exuberant evening of art appreciation for the exhibition of “De Witte Olifant” workshop

For the past two weeks, Aruba has been host to four art students of “The White Elephant” School of Art for the Mentally Challenged in Holland. Joined by their mentors, professional artists Muriel and Meika, they traveled to Aruba to participate in a series of workshops organized by the Aruba Art Foundation headed by Maria-Theresa Martinez. Also participating in the workshops were eight individuals that attend the Centro Man Na Obra of Aruba, an organization devoted to productive arts and crafts and other projects for the adult mentally challenged under the supervision of administrator Elvira Arias-Tromp.

The result of these workshops was a triumphant exhibition and auction hosted by the Marriott Resort and Casino in their new Grand Ballroom on Wednesday evening, with the proceeds of the auction earmarked to finance a trip to “De Witte Olifant” Art School in Holland for a contingent of Aruba’s mentally challenged artists. The room was filled with art lovers and supporters of the work of the Aruba Art Foundation and the SVGA, the Aruba Foundation for the Mentally Disabled. Present for the exhibition and reception was the Minister of Culture Ramon Lee, Director of the Instituto di Cultura, Frank Croes and many other figures prominent in Aruban art circles, including Jenny Kock, a noted island artist that studied in Holland, who is both physically and mentally challenged, and internationally recognized as an accomplished artist.

Before the auction began, Maria-Theresa Martinez welcomed all of those attending and introduced the artists. The four students from Holland, Alex, Aranka and Ralph, also included Magriet Maduro, a native-born Aruban living in Holland for the past seventeen years. They were joined for the evening by Mylene, Jessica, Jacqueline, Jeffrey and sisters Veronica and Judith of Aruba to display their work and bask in the admiration for their accomplishments. Laureen Croes-Eman, auctioneer for the evening and one of their mentors during the workshops expressed particular pride in the work of Veronica Henriquez, because Veronica was “not even able to put a pencil to paper” when Laureen and Maria-Theresa began working with the students two months ago. By the end of the project, Veronica was enthusiastically creating dramatic expressions of her own personal vision of the various subjects, as were all the participants. Previously to the program the Man Na Obra students had some experience with copying designs on souvenir crafts, but had not had the opportunity to learn to express themselves and realize their innate artistic abilities. A number of the larger pieces sold that night were collaborative efforts by all the students, brilliant with color and imagination, and the auction raised substantial funds for next year’s trip.

During the auction, the bidding was fierce, and the tempo was set by the first item being purchased by three-year-old Lisa van de Spaan with the cooperation of her father Rene, for 1400 Aruban florins (\$800.)

Other big spenders were John Snel and Anne Bonn, a Dutch couple retired in Aruba, who bid against each other to bring up the prices of their three pieces. Another multiple buyer was Reint J. Roosien of the Caribbean Accounting and Tax Consultants, purchasing three of the larger works during the auction and several smaller pieces that sold at fixed prices, with which he plans to decorate the company office in Tanki Flip.

Laureen also thanked the many companies and individuals that donated their time, services, and facilities to the realization of this project. This includes Antraco and Van Dorp for providing the art materials, Thrifty Car Rental for transport, and Victoria Bottling Company for all the Pepsi products providing refreshment during field trips. Additional thanks were expressed to Red Sail Sports, De Palm Tours, and Surfside Marina for hosting the group on recreational outings. Special thanks for their time to Stanley Dabian of the Instituto di Cultura and Gustav Nouel, an accomplished Aruban born artist living in Holland who instigated this workshop and many others this past year.

Tujo Werleman, Director of the SVGA expressed that he is very pleased by the results, and considers it another victory in integrating the mentally challenged into the mainstream Aruban community. “Being with the artists from Holland and going out to locations to paint gave our students a chance to grow artistically and socially,” he observes, “the foundation always works to advance our clients in this way, to make our people feel that they are human and worthwhile, and an evening like this is invaluable in assisting in that goal. They are very proud of their accomplishments, and it helps to show the community that they can do what everyone else can do, be it sports, work, or art, they can do it, in their own way.”

Maria-Theresa Martinez also acknowledges that she has been profoundly moved by the enriching experience of working with this group of artists, and feels she has learned more from them than she could ever teach. She told the audience “I consider getting to know these people to be a gift from God.” Before the auction began, Jenny Kock was welcomed to the podium to make a brief address to the gathering with the assistance of Gustave Nouel as interpreter. He told them “In Holland, all the people treat us (the mentally challenged) like normal people. It is my hope that the people of Aruba will someday do the same, and not treat us like children. That is my dream.”